Human Rights and U.S. Intervention in Central America

“Murder is not morally justifiable. Self-defense may be argued if the victim has knowledge which may destroy the resistance organization if divulged. Assassination of persons responsible for atrocities or reprisals may be regarded as just punishment. Killing a political leader whose burgeoning career is a clear and present danger to the cause of freedom may be held necessary. But assassination can seldom be employed with a clear conscience. Persons who are morally squeamish should not attempt it.”


“We are not myths of the past, ruins in the jungle, or animals in the zoo. We are people and we want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism.”

–Rigoberta Menchú

G uilty – On May 9, 2013, former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. Thirty years after he left office and thirty years after the original complaint was filed, he was sentenced to eighty years in prison. Over the course of twenty-seven hearings, involving direct testimony from ninety survivors and evidence from thousands of government documents, a global audience sat in rapture as witness after witness conjured images of mass-murder, torture, and rape from the military regime’s systematic campaign of annihilation against indigenous Mayans.

Seared on the collective memory of Central America long before the trial, the Guatemalan genocide was an extreme chapter in a hemispheric civil war pitting virtually all forms of internal dissent against brutal anti-communist terror, trained, financed, and supported by the United States. In the period leading up to the genocide, Guatemala was a leading recipient of U.S. military aid and training; this assistance generated heated public debate; and the U.S. eventually issued a formal apology for its role in government atrocities. But, during the trial, neither the prosecution nor the defense mentioned U.S. support for Ríos Montt or the military regimes that produced him. A similar silence pervades contemporary human rights policymaking. The most important synthesis of U.S. policy towards genocide, for example, Samantha Power’s epic, A Problem from Hell (2002), fails to mention Guatemala at all (whereas it includes an entire chapter on Iraq). The same could be said of the rest of Central America in particular. The U.S. has turned away from Central America even as the underlying conditions that produced the civil wars of the 1980s have gotten worse, the number of Central American migrants and refugees in the United States has ballooned, and some of the most important legal precedents for post-conflict justice hang in the balance — cases that could make human rights mean something in the world like never before.

And then came the kids and the pictures. In the summer of 2014, leaked photographs of children wrapped in space blankets and huddled elbow-to-elbow under fluorescent lights conjured images of Hurricane Katrina. President Obama declared a humanitarian crisis, journalists descended on the border, and a group of desperate children became the latest flashpoint in a struggle to determine whose suffering and survival counts in the contemporary United States. In total, 68,000 unaccompanied immigrant children arrived on the U.S. border in 2014, the vast majority from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, the majority were fleeing violence and likely eligible for international protection. While the surge in unaccompanied immigrant children took policy makers by surprise, the violence that these children are fleeing has been steadily rising since the immediate aftermath of the civil wars of the 1980s. Indeed, by many measures, social conditions are worse now than they were at the height of the armed conflicts. The need to understand the legacies of civil war and U.S. intervention in Central America couldn’t be greater.
This seminar aims to revive the recent history of U.S. intervention in El Salvador and Guatemala, by providing a broad historical overview, followed by very specific cases studies from each country, case studies that emphasize: causal relationships and connections between foreign policy objectives and local social and political struggles, the lasting legacies of the Cold War in the region, and the politics of post-conflict memory and forgetting.

No region in the world has been more integrated into the security strategy and political economy of the United States than was Central America in the twentieth century. And nowhere did the transformation of U.S. foreign policy from the principle of national self-determination to overt military and economic imperialism ring clearer. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government treated the region as a vital defense and trade link that could make or break its global power. Throughout the twentieth century, Central America loomed large in the American political imagination, sometimes fantastically so.

Politicians, journalists, and ideologues, in particular, the national dramas of Guatemala and El Salvador as a screen upon which to project racial, cultural, and economic alter-egos, along with the most ardent and exaggerated fears of the Cold War. Progressive U.S. presidents and legislators who fought monopoly capitalism and corruption at home, staked their reputations on repeated armed interventions in favor of U.S. capital and corrupt, authoritarian regimes in Central America. Caricatures of popular leaders like Augusto César Sandino, Jacobo Arbenz, and Farabundo Martí, with a few picareseque, Butch-Cassidy-style exceptions, paraded across the headlines of U.S. newspapers, the pied pipers of duped nations of children with contracts from the devil in hand. The nationalization of land and resources on a moderate scale in Central American nations provoked massive, unilateral U.S. reactions, while in the same period the U.S. responded to much larger nationalizations – in Mexico(oil,1938), Bolivia (tin, 1952), and Venezuela (oil,1960) – with renewed cooperation and the intensification of favorable trade and aid packages. In a similar vein, tiny, ill-funded communist movements in Central America, nearly bereft of Marxist-Leninist ideology or support from the Soviet bloc, generated blitzkriegs of political propaganda, economic boycotts, sabotage, and military operations from the U.S. In numerous cases, U.S. officials who participated in Central American interventions have conceded after the fact that their actions were disproportionate to the supposed threats they were designed to neutralize, and in fact yielded unforeseen negative consequences that far outweighed any positive impact that they might have made, even from a strictly U.S. perspective. Such admissions, although relatively frequent, appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

The civil conflicts in Central America that have often served as the pretext for U.S. intervention, and generally escalated thanks to the U.S. presence, have prompted numerous attempts at international mediation. Since the late nineteenth century, multi-lateral negotiations have produced paper compromises to regional disputes, some demonstrating unquestionable legal skill and intellectual creativity. Such agreements, however, have ultimately failed to keep the peace or ensure human rights in Central America. Authoritarian regimes from the region, and sometimes as far flung as Argentina, have, often with U.S. support, actively conspired to thwart and suppress democratic social movements, revolutionary forces, and regimes committed to social justice, by violence and subterfuge.

Such conspiracies reached their zenith in the 1980s, when the executive branch of the U.S. government trampled not only international mediators and agreements, but its own congress and laws, in order to participate in an elaborate multi-lateral conspiracy to overthrow the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, involving military dictatorships in El Salvador, Argentina, and South Africa, among others (the Iran-Contra affair). Repeated armed occupations, the overthrow of governments, the murder of popular leaders, the manipulation of national finances, the training of military officials in torture and assassination – including some who carried out one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century, all place the United States at the scene of multiple crimes against human rights in Central America.

The scope and explosiveness of such intervention has repeatedly made Central America policy a catalyst for public debate in the U.S., a series of exemplary cases through which to discuss burning political, moral, and social questions. Thanks in large part to repeated U.S. interventions, civil war, and a subsequent refugee crisis, since the 1980s, Central Americans have also become one of the fastest growing populations within the U.S. The history of U.S. intervention colors their struggle for rights and recognition in the U.S. to this day.
Indeed, social movements that have sought to protect Central Americans in the U.S. have acted equally as critics of U.S. foreign policy and human rights violations in Central America, as they have critics of U.S. immigration policy and advocates of immigrants’ rights in the U.S.

Books
New and used copies of the following texts are widely available, and for reasonable prices (less than $15.00); the Cullather is also available digitally (kindle).


Writing Assignments
The writing component of this course will consist of two document analyses. For each document analysis, you will choose an historical document and write an essay analyzing how it addresses an important human rights question. I have included many documents and links to document collections in the syllabus below, and I hope that you’ll take advantage of them for your writing assignments. However, you should also feel free to define “document” as broadly as you like here – surveys, novels, testimonials, paintings, poems, photographs, etc. are just as valid as de-classified national security documents, constitutions, legal opinions, and declarations. My only request is that your document fit with one of the episodes examined in the syllabus below. Please make sure that the document addresses a relevant question, and that your essay makes an argument as to how it addresses that question, and why this answer is significant.

I will evaluate your papers based on the novelty of your approach to that document and the general clarity and quality of your essay. The formal protocol for both document analyses is exactly the same. You document analyses must include:

- Your name;
- An original title;
- A body text of between 1500 and 1750 words (include a word count);
- 12 pt. text, double-spaced, with 1 inch margins;
- Citations by way of footnotes, formatted according to the *Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Ed.*
- Formatted for compatibility with MS Word

Please submit your essays via email attachment, to emeade@sandiego.edu; please include “Document Analysis” in the subject field of your message; and your last name in the filename of your attachment. **Final drafts of both document analyses are due on Friday, March 27, by noon PST.** I strongly suggest that you start working on them ahead of time and use the relevant seminars to hone your reading of the documents.

Schedule of Seminars

**Thursday, January 29**

**Displaced and Disappeared: Unaccompanied Immigrant Children and the Legacies of the Cold War in Central America**

Reference Materials:


### Thursday, February 5

**The Massacre at El Mozote**

**Readings:**

   a. “Conversation with Atlacatl Battalion Officers Concerning Alleged Mis-Conduct of the Army in Morazan Department,” February 1, 1982
   b. “Chat with General Garcia,” February 1, 1982
   e. “Allegations of Massacre in Morazan Department by Atlacatl Battalion,” January 29, 1982
   g. “Saving El Salvador,” February 1, 1982
   h. “More on Alleged Morazan Massacre; San Antonio Abad; and Nuns,” February 9, 1982
   j. “Secret, Intelligence Report,” January 5, 1992

**Reference Materials:**


### Thursday, February 19

**Speaking Truth to Power: Torture and Accountability in U.S. Courts**

**Readings:**

Reference Materials:

Thursday, February 26
Revolution and Counterrevolution in Guatemala: Liberal Apotheosis and Apocalypse

Readings:

Reference Materials:

Thursday, March 5
Trauma and Truth in Post-Conflict Guatemala

Readings:

Reference Materials:
Thursday, March 19

Cleansing Means Blood: The Ríos Montt Genocide Trial

Readings:

2. “Death Squads, Guerrilla War, Covert Operations, and Genocide: Guatemala and the United States, 1954-1999” (Guatemala and the U.S.) http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/collections/content/GU/intro.jsp [For this one, I’d like you to try running some searches on your own; think about how we might locate evidence of torture, rape, or assassination...]

Reference Materials: